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Name: Paul Reynolds.

Dates: April 18th to May 12th, 2025.

Venue: Treak Community Centre, Siem Reap.

My motivation for volunteering:

Having previously undertaken an e-volunteering placement in early 2021, I subsequently went to Treak as a volunteer to advise the Headteacher, Dara, in September 2023. With the arrival of a new Headteacher, Nirann, in early 2024 it seemed an opportune time to visit again in an advisory capacity as suggested by Michael. *(Michael is people and places' local partner in Cambodia)*

I had originally been drawn to Treak as a Community Centre which provided other local opportunities with brick making & plastic recycling, a very busy sewing programme, gardening, development of the kitchen etc.

Pre departure preparation:

Very comprehensive. I was well prepared by Dianne, and regular contact in between placements had facilitated my preparation.

Dianne and Sallie are an exceptional team preparing volunteers very thoroughly for their placements.

Orientation and preparation at the start of the placement:

I was met at the airport by a driver sent by the management team and then arranged to have an early supper with Michael Horton, the Director of CONCERT. By arriving on a Saturday, I felt that I was fully briefed, prepared and refreshed, ready to start my placement two days later.

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My experience and work:

As a former Headteacher, I was asked to act predominantly as an adviser to Nirann with various aspects of management. I talked to staff informally, gave presentations at staff meetings and also offered some staff training sessions. I carried out appraisals on all staff to identify their strengths, areas to work on and some possible future staff training.

Below is the programme of topics that I covered:

- Staff wellbeing
- Time management
- Delegation
- Building self confidence
- Decision making
- The importance of teamwork
- School values
- Staff self-assessment forms
- Staff appraisals
- 'Buddy' system
- Full day of Personal Development with staff
- Effective teaching strategies
- Future areas of consideration for staff
- Fundraising and donations
- Parent communication
- Individual session with one of the teachers on Phonics
- Devising a Staff Handbook
- Review of Code of Conduct for both Staff & Volunteers and Visitors
- Review of Job Description for Sreynoch
- Individual appraisals of staff with Nirann. Minutes taken and action plan of training required for staff drawn up
- Appraisal of Nirann
- Visit to local state primary school with Nirann
- Dealing with difficult staff and situations
- Action Plan for Links with Wookey Primary School

Successes, disappointments & challenges of my placement:

I covered all the areas and ground that I had planned to do, and in fact the placement exceeded my expectations given the difference in ways of management styles and systems, as well the differing cultures. Very pleased with a productive three weeks.

No disappointments.

The challenge was always going to be the difference in cultures and the relative lack of teacher training which staff had previously received.

Highlight of my volunteer experience:

I loved my daily 4km bike ride to school, my early evening bike rides to Angkor Wat in particular, swimming daily in the Victory pool as well as two Saturday staff bike rides around the 'big circuit' of temples.

I really enjoyed the company and camaraderie of the staff, and Michael and Salin in particular.

I was privileged to visit the home villages of Chhuer, one of the teachers, and Salin which gave me a great insight into the 'real' Cambodia.

Visits to restaurants and temples were memorable.

Professionally, I felt a warm feeling of satisfaction that I had covered all areas that I was asked to do, but so much more. Nirann and her staff were very enthusiastic and willing 'students' which helped enormously.

Accommodation:

I stayed at the Victory House in Siem Reap which is where I stayed last time two years ago. Very good value, food is fine (both Western and Khmer) if you do not want to go out into town. The staff especially Moy are very helpful and friendly; nothing is too much trouble for her.

Leisure time:

- Cycling in and around Siem Reap. Two staff bike rides. Great fun!
- Temples: 'small' and 'big' circuits. 62 dollars for a 3-day pass. Pass needed if you want to cycle around the temples.
- Angkor Botanical Garden. Free entry. Lovely coffee! Go early when it opens at 8am.
- Lots of lovely restaurants that cater for both Western and Khmer tastes, particularly Haven, TryMe, Paper Tiger, Shin the Sushi bar, New Leaf.
- Buddhist temple & Cambodia Historical Photography Museum. My second visit, very humbling and gives a real insight into a painful Khmer past.
- I used Chhuer, one of the teachers at Treak, for some visits. A knowledgeable guide.
- Two-day visit to Battambang, a fascinating town.

Would I recommend volunteering to other people?

Absolutely yes! It is a wonderful opportunity to experience first-hand the life and culture of another country and people. It helps to put our own lives in perspective.

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